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CHAPTER 17

That Teacher Pedestal: How Alternative Methods Challenged My Concept of the Teacher Role

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Abstract

Music education classes are typically controlled by the teacher whether through conducting, deciding on what music to play, or just always being the one who knows best. This chapter depicts my account of how non-idiomatic improvisation pedagogy offered experiences that challenged traditional teacher-student roles as well as put into question what might be meaningful material for music education to include. Methods inspired by the work of R. Murray Schafer and John Zorn provided the opportunity for me to question always controlling the direction of each class. I describe a moment of vulnerability which contributed to a more democratic approach to music education where students' own experiences can affect the direction of the class. In this approach students also creatively observe, interpret, and react to the experience of each of their classmates. My account includes observations from a high school student and two teacher candidates who observed and/or participated in my secondary music classes.

Introduction

In the last few years I have become fascinated with the use of non-bebop based improvisation in the music classroom, its affect on the ways that students participate in making music together, and its affect on me as a teacher. It has become very apparent to me that improvisation pedagogy can provide opportunities for students to participate in music class that are not normally present within traditional teacher-led band, choir and orchestra ensemble pedagogies. My approach to improvisation provides access for everyone and anyone, embraces diversity of ways of participating and expressing and, by altering my teacher role, enables students to create and own the music. Moreover, it engages students with music, each other and me in ways that not only challenge our assumptions of who and what we are as musicians and

participants in learning and teaching, but how we engage dilemmas of power and inequities as they impact us and our communities.

During my second year of teaching, 2003, I invited Toronto based clinician and musician Dave Clark into my classroom to take my students through some free improvisation exercises he had adapted from the work of Mills College professor/musician Fred Frith and New York City musician/composer John Zorn. This experience, as I will later explain in more detail, drastically altered my ideas about teaching and learning and my educational goals as a teacher. Since then I have used much of this type of work in all of my classes and I have searched out improvising musicians, clinicians and thinkers in Toronto, Montreal, and New York in order connect them with my students and other young musicians. As improvising musicians touring through Toronto, I invite them into my school whenever possible. I have also conducted a number of workshops both with Dave Clark and on my own, including work with Royal Conservatory of Music students, high school students attending schools around the area, and teacher candidates at the Faculty of Music and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. My excitement about the success and value of this work has grown and is evident in the collection of pedagogical materials on the online database www.creative-ed.ca.

I must note that a vision of music education which incorporates and takes inspiration from free improvisation was very new to me and, I might say, even contrary to my experience. Growing up in a modern Mennonite family in southwestern Manitoba, I played the trombone, tuba, and bass guitar in my school from grade seven to twelve. My main instrument at Brandon University was trombone and my music education program focused mostly on my development as a band instructor. I know this education is not unique among music teachers, but it is important to first place myself within this well-known paradigm. Upon graduation I moved to Toronto to play music and teach. When I was hired in 2002, I was asked to help begin a more traditional band and orchestra stream to add to the school's very successful R & B/rock band program. I soon realized that few of the students were interested in participating in band or orchestra groups in the school. My first two years were filled with frustration and disappointment. I began to wonder why this more traditional stream wasn't succeeding. Why did the students not want it? Did I even want it? What did I want for myself as a teacher? What did I want for my students? What did I want for our relationship as students and teacher? Most importantly, what did they want? How could teaching and learning processes address the effects of power within our shared classroom in ways that also might connect with concerns of our everyday lives? How could music class be more than music class? Did I really want to be a band teacher? If not, what did I want to teach? How did I want to teach? I never really thought of any other options for music education.

Ever since high school, partially because of a close friend and late night CBC programs, I most often listened to music that was on the fringe of the mainstream. I bought late recordings of John Coltrane, those from various groups of John Zorn's circle in New York, and other *out* music such as that of Mr. Bungle and Frank Zappa. In the last few years of my undergraduate studies, I began to take an interest

in experimental composers such as George Crumb, Xanakis, and John Cage. I did not have any wind ensemble music in my collection. Sure, I could name two of most famous wind ensembles; Tokyo Kosei and . . . hmm . . . I actually cannot remember the other. With the exception of maybe Warren Benson's *The Passing Bell* (1974), I never really liked wind ensemble music anyway. Still, I did not think to connect the music I listened to with the music I taught. It seemed to make more sense to teach band because that was what I was taught. During my recent graduate studies I spent time reading and discussing why classroom music is so separate from each student's everyday life and musical experience. I guess I never really asked myself the same question—at least until I met Dave Clark.

Dave Clark was the original drummer in the Rheostatics, one my favorite Canadian bands. Through playing with different musicians in various circles in Toronto, I have had the pleasure of meeting many of my musical heroes and have grown close to some of them. At a rehearsal Dave and I began talking about improvisation. I became intrigued enough with his ideas that I brought him in to work with a small group of my students. I knew about improvised music but could not imagine how Dave intended to use it in the classroom. He started with warm-up exercises like those you would see in drama classrooms and then presented adaptations of Fred Frith exercises and John Zorn's game-piece *Cobra*. The latter employs hand signals to lead group improvisations that allow for individual interpretation and input. Two hand signals became very important to me on this day. One of them was an indication for players to use their voices, and the other was to prompt a solo. As the day progressed, I often found myself in the "safe zone" outside the circle of improvising students (a place teachers often gravitate towards during improvisation workshops). Looking on and smiling, I was suddenly given both of the above signals . . . I began to vocalize, turning bright red, my teacher's pedestal smashed to bits. I had no idea what to do. How could my students see me get embarrassed to this extent and still respect me? After this experience I realized pedestals have no place in music classes, at least not in mine. Teachers can be vulnerable too, and chances are this move toward distributing power more equally will give students more confidence to explore their own creativity in front of others.

R. Murray Schafer (1993) hints at this in his collection of pamphlets, *The Thinking Ear*, which includes ten maxims that he posted above his desk during his ten years of teaching at Simon Fraser University. One of the maxims states, "There are no more teachers, there is just a community of learners," while another urges, "Teach on the verge of peril" (p. 237). It is not only okay for teachers to be vulnerable, but a much less artificial learning environment is created if they do. Getting myself off that pedestal did a lot for my students and for me. It allowed us as a community of learners to admit that traditional band pedagogy was not working for us. It also allowed us to explore student leads, taking us in directions that we never would have followed if I had continued being the sole navigator. Many times since then, I have found that students are much more willing to explore than I was, instinctively finding their own routes toward creativity.

Dave's work that day was significant not only for me, however. Levels of character and individuality in the students quickly became apparent. I've seen shy students take the lead with improvised conducting, "jocks" continue improvising even after class has ended, and overly confident students follow their peers into new experiences. In *Free Play* Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) describes this type of moment in this way: "Looking into the moment of improvisation, I was uncovering patterns related to every kind of creativity; uncovering clues as well to living a life that is self-creating, self-organizing, and authentic. I came to see improvisation as a master key to creativity" (p. 6). This is what I saw happening when Dave was working with these students whom I thought I knew so well. Some led group improvisations with originality I never before imagined them having. It occurred to me that I was focusing more on their skill as musicians than just guiding each of them individually into educational experiences that unblocked their creativity. I am still having trouble placing labels on what exactly is occurring during free improvisation games and exercises but this initial experience had a lot of influence on my thoughts about the possibilities of music in schools and about education in general. Dave quickly brought the students into a safe place where experimentation was encouraged and highly focused observation of fellow students was required. They needed to listen to others in order to participate. Each student could contribute in his/her own way while at the same time listening and reacting to what others offered. Although I knew this group of students well, I learned much about their own creative personalities. I was not the only person seeing significance in what was going on; many other students, even those not in music classes, began to enter the room and observe this exciting and welcoming environment, extending our learning community beyond the classroom. In this new environment knowledge was not passed in only one direction, from teacher to student. The notion of authority was challenged; no person alone was deciding on what is a valuable or worthy educational endeavor.

This truly was a brand new way to look at music education for me. Before this, I had not known any other way to teach. Around this same time I rediscovered Canadian Composer R. Murray Schafer. A quick internet search introduced me to a collection of his early educational pamphlets. Originally published under the title *Creative Music Education*, it later became known as *The Thinking Ear* (Schafer, 1993). I have tried many of his exercises in regular band classes with great success. That same year I was assigned a small class of twenty-two senior students who were keen to learn. This class was a great environment to try more of Schafer's work as well as other alternative methods. Besides performing various pieces of music, including a version of Stravinsky's *Ragtime* (1999), students in this class spent much of their time improvising based on exercises and ideas taken from Schafer's work. We tried almost everything I read about. Before these attempts, I became convinced that Schafer was editing his books so that only the successful moments were described but I found the same constant success with my class. A perfect example is a large group accompaniment to a classic Hitchcock scene, first discussing ideas for mood setting, trying them, re-evaluating, and then performing (1993, p. 11-12). I followed the same process with exercises in Schafer's other books, *Hearsing* (2005) and *A Sound Education* (1995), with similar success. In this class, we also spent a lot of time working with concepts created by musician/composer John Zorn, which intro-

duced improvised game pieces and large group conductions using hand signals. Both the Zorn and Schafer material offered numerous alternate paths that students were all very eager to follow. When inspiration hit, hand signals were quickly adapted to include localized individual student impulses, including a cue for a freely improvised version of AC/DC's "Thunderstruck." The following is a reflection of these experiences by one of my former students. I include it to give another perspective of these experiences, and also to show what some students may take from this type of music education.

It is hard to describe the learning environment I first encountered in Doug Friesen's music class. This was not a band class with chord charts I suddenly had to transpose, nor was he merely a conductor leading his students; it was an open, shared, learning experience. Doug was learning, laughing, and exploring the spontaneous world of music along with us. He brought to us musicians such as Fred Frith and Dave Clark along with beautiful moments of experimentation, embarrassment, creativity, and growth. A classroom of musicians quickly became a classroom of peers and friends, inspired by each other in their attempts to find their creative voices, their "element." As students we were driven by our relentless need to experiment and to explore. Our hunger for the methods, styles, and sounds we had never known before was incredible. We were euphoric and inspired, searching for new and more creative ways to play, observe, and listen to music. And at the heart of it all was the foundation of our classroom: respect, openness, and experimentation. I carry this all with me, searching for learning experiences as passionate as the one I had with my peers in high school. I continually explore, experiment, and question, and find joy in sharing my insights with others. And what may have seemed like an "alternative" teaching method years ago is now the only method I understand. I bring it with me wherever I go.

This student did not continue in music studies, although she does often mention how much she misses it. Even though she chose not to pursue bebop or classical studies, the improvisation exercises that she was a part of at my school allowed her to participate at the same level as any other student. In her years at Rosedale she went from being a very quiet, most often solitary student to assuming a leadership role in class and outside of it. Of course this cannot be solely attributed to her alternative music experience, but I do believe this more egalitarian approach did contribute to her confidence in class and in the world.

After participating in a workshop that I led at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music, a student currently studying to be a music teacher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education came to observe at my school. She reflects:

Being intrigued by, and somewhat skeptical of, Doug's seemingly different approaches to music education I asked if I could observe more at his school. My first experience there was watching an after school open improv session. Doug and the students took turns conducting the group in

spontaneous compositions. The sound and ideas that were coming out of the students was astounding. My curiosity grew.

I started coming weekly to observe a small after-school combo of instrumental students who would play a type of music I had never heard in a public school. To me, it was a hybrid of jazz, klezmer, and free improvisation. I was constantly forced to think back to my high school and then-current university experiences playing in jazz and wind ensembles, as well as combos and chamber music. Repertoire and instrumentation aside, the main difference between what these students were experiencing and what I have, is that the focus was on creativity, not reproduction and rules. Also, the manner in which Doug interacted with his students was worlds apart from how I had grown to view a “music educator.” He sat in the circle with them, often playing trombone, or covering for a missing member on another instrument, and always laughing along with the group.

Students were encouraged to bring in their own compositions, conduct each other, and were completely comfortable to make musical suggestions to their peers. As a group they would also work on arrangements of recordings, together figuring out the chord progressions and licks. Their teacher was along side them in all of these processes, assisting when he could, letting them lead often, and intervening when he thought appropriate. There were a few instances when Doug could not make the rehearsal (as he was on sabbatical doing his Master’s). The group still met regularly, and even invited me to bring in my bassoon and join them. I was terrified, but accepted. As I played with the students for the first time, they were extremely encouraging and welcoming. I still felt like an outsider, it was such a different experience from sitting in on any other rehearsal. There was no sense of competition amongst the group, and all were free to experiment. When, or how often, do such instances truly ever occur in a traditional band setting?

Most music teachers I know have a background in either be-bop era jazz or pre-20th century classical music. This model perpetuates the teacher as sole guide. The closed product restricts us from exploring other musical endeavors and also from addressing student creativity. Music educators need to be open to pedagogical techniques that lead to questions and multiple classroom directions. In my modest experience it seems that many proposals for alternatives in music education focus on band-aid like solutions that involve changing only the genre of music we teach.¹ The inclusion of jazz in the curriculum was hoped to address some issues of relevance, and now we are hoping that multicultural music education will be a solution. I agree with Wayne Bowman (2002), however, when he argues that it is not what music we teach that is important but how we teach it (p. 74). This was why I was so attracted to improvisation pedagogy; it could be all things at anytime: rock, metal, classical, East Indian, or Latin. It is the process of each student and all students, including their own background knowledge and experience while also learning from

each other. During one class I asked a student from South Korea to sing a Korean song for his classmates. It was the first time he had ever done so outside of his house. Although this was not during an improvisational exercise I believe the previously established egalitarian classroom atmosphere helped him feel safe in doing so.

Improvisation keeps the focus away from canonic musical monuments as moments come and go. The end is not a reproduction of a Western European music artifact. Quite often everyone, including me, leaves the classroom with beaming smiles not really knowing what occurred, but feeling a little more energy and confidence for facing real life situations outside the classroom. Because of my school's population and administration I keep thinking that my situation is ideal and that this work might not be as successful in other places, but this assumption has been proven wrong in one improvisational workshop after another. The following is a reflection from workshop participant who recently completed his initial teacher education program.

I had come to the realisation that I could probably never become a "straight-ahead" band or strings instructor. The workshop with Doug Friesen and Dave Clark at OISE/UT in the fall of 2007 was an eye-opener in this regard. It gave me a glimpse into some of the possibilities of incorporating creativity-based learning activities in a high school music program. Doug and Dave showed us exercises in large and small ensemble improvisation. Until then, incorporating these types of improvisational exercises in a high school setting seemed unimaginable. My experiences with high music programs, either those that I observed in high school or those that I participated in as a volunteer teaching assistant, told me that the most of the class time needed to be spent on rehearsing repertoire. If improvisation was encountered, it was often in an idiomatic context, where students may have been working on soloing in a jazz or blues context. Even then I witnessed the undermining of improvisatory exercises where students would often prefer to sight-read a pre-written solo instead of coming up with their own solo for their performances. Everything I experienced until this workshop told me that my experience and knowledge of improvisation had no place in the high school music classroom. You can begin to understand my apprehension about entering this career, as my initial experiences with high school music programs did not seem to value any of the knowledge and experiences that I had come to value. I'm glad I persisted.

Two years ago I took a leave from my school in downtown Toronto to pursue a Master's degree in music education and to research the improvisation pedagogy that I have been developing and practicing. Through my coursework, I was introduced to thinkers who have further encouraged as well as challenged my thoughts about music education and education in general. I have been strongly influenced by books such as Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1970), Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), bell hooks *Teaching Community* (2002), and Christopher Small's *Music, Education, Society* (1977). These have been extremely exciting discoveries

for me as they all propose ideas that I have been able to explore in the classroom with improvisation pedagogy. I know that improvisation does not equal social justice, but the pedagogy is teaching me a lot about whose voice gets heard and whose doesn't, who has access and who doesn't, as well as which life worlds are represented and which aren't. Perhaps most importantly, it helps me to focus on trying to understand each student's experiences of the music classroom.

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Endnotes

¹ Lucy Green's (2002) book, *How Popular Musicians Learn*, is a notable and encouraging exception.